

INTERVIEW

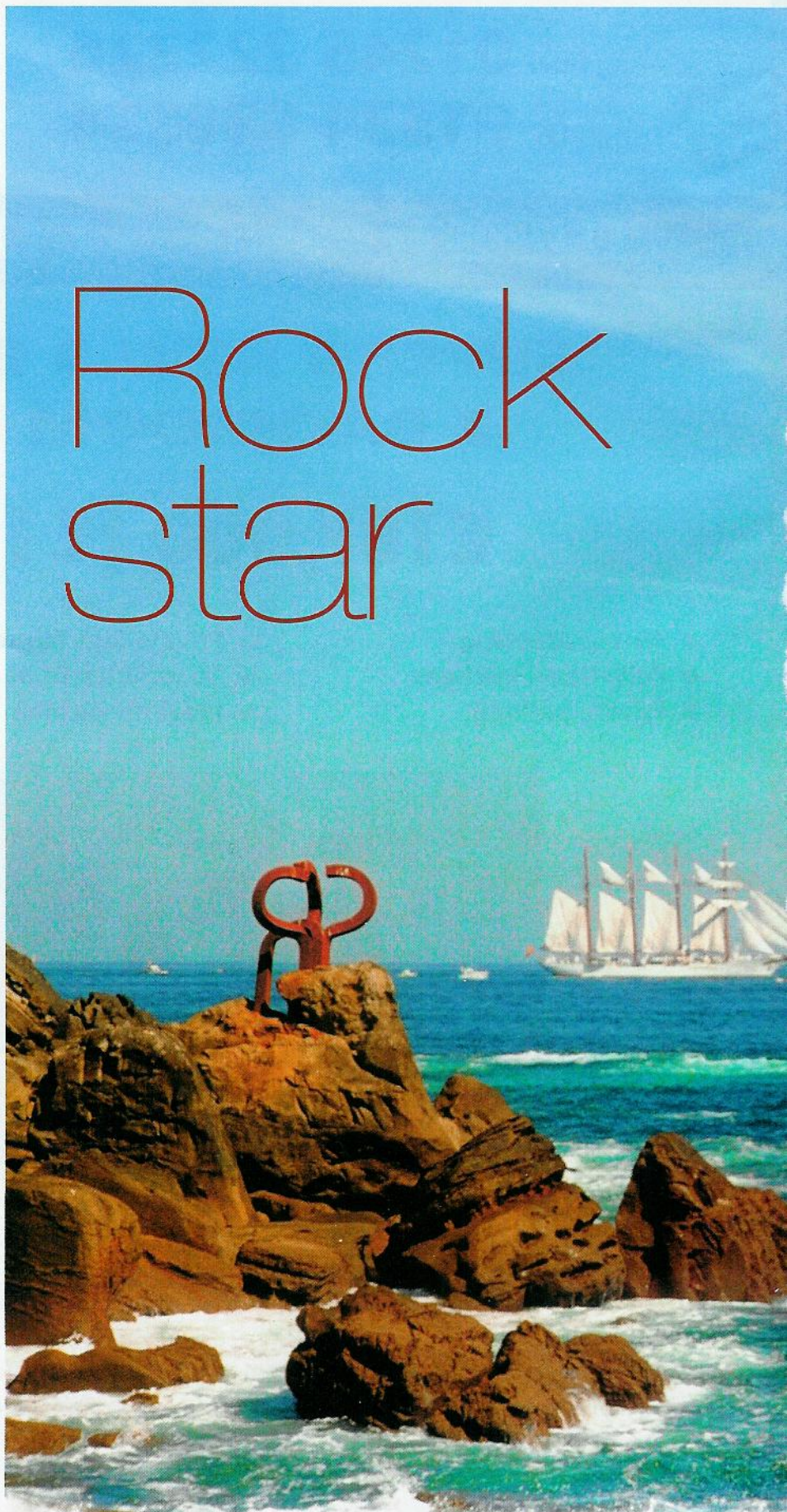
words SARAH ANDREWS



Eduardo Chillida's grand-scale sculptures make a statement all over the world. But the best place to get inside the artist's head is back at his place, deep in the heart of Basque Country

HIS weighty iron and concrete sculptures dot cities across the world, and his grand-scale projects (like carving out a skyscraper-sized hole in the middle of a Spanish mountain) still have the art world buzzing years after his death. Eduardo Chillida is one of Spain's greatest cultural icons, and the best way to get a grip on his work is with a visit to Chillida-Leku, literally "Chillida's Place", a fascinating outdoor museum dedicated to the prolific Basque artist.

Just 15 minutes beyond the bustle, boulevards and beaches of San Sebastián is an unexpected spot of tranquillity: an ancient farmhouse surrounded by rolling fields, a sparse forest and – here comes the interesting part – dozens of mammoth sculptures. The 40 large-scale works, most made of granite or an iron-copper alloy and weighing several tons, provide a wonderful mix of art and nature that is somehow calming and stimulating at the same time. The museum is a reflection of Chillida's own



Rock star

personality and work: it's simple and not at all flashy, yet there is great depth beyond the surface.

"Chillida-Leku is the result of a profound reflection that was always present in my father's work," says Luís Chillida, the sculptor's son and currently the communications and commercial director of the



museum. "For my father, sculpture had to have a relation with the space or place around it, so in his public works he always tried to either adapt to an existing place, or to create a place specifically for his works."

When Chillida and his wife stumbled upon a small

field crowned by the ruins of Zabalaga, a 16th-century manor house (one of the oldest still-standing houses in the Basque Country), they fell in love with it.

They bought the house in 1984 and began buying up surrounding forest and farmland. The property now stretches across 12 hectares. ▶

Peines del Viento in San Sebastián and Eduardo Chillida

► Chillida spent years on a “long and meditated” renovation and restructuring of the house and grounds, his son says. “But at the same time he continued working on his sculptures. Once he placed them here he thought that it would be difficult to find a better place for them. And so little by little Chillida-Leku was created.”

Unlike more staid exhibitions, here visitors are encouraged to get close to Chillida’s works, to touch them, even to hit them to see what kind of sounds are produced.

The way these pieces interact with their environment is an essential element of their aesthetic, so many of the works are affected by rain, wind or other natural forces. There is no better example of this than in his famous *Peines del Viento* (Combs of the Wind), a set of three multi-armed sculptures that sit on San Sebastián’s waterfront. Battered daily by wind and waves, the sculptures have lost nearly 1mm off their surfaces. To Chillida junior, this is simply a part of the life of the sculpture. “The sculpture always has to face up, to be aware of

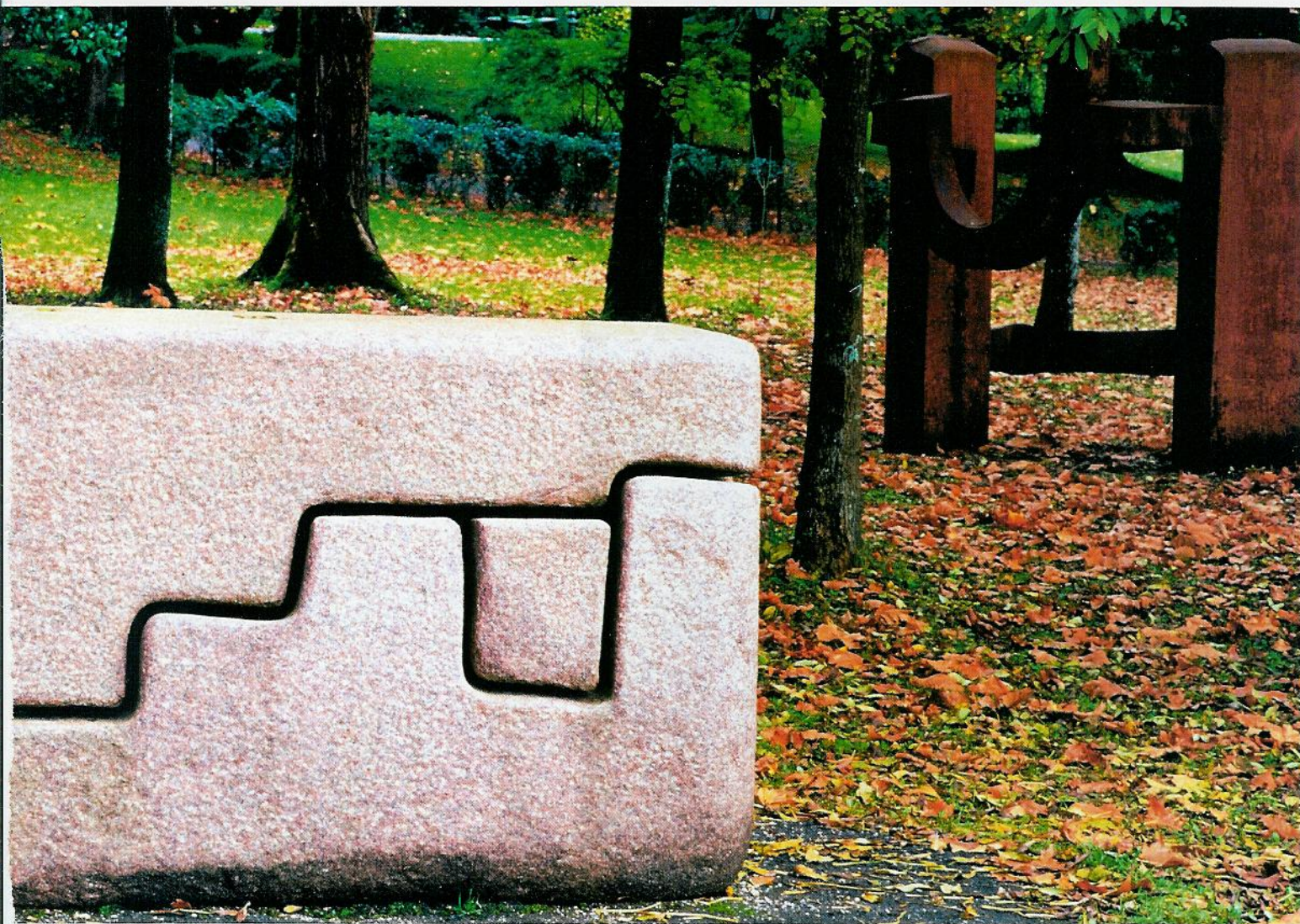
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everything that moves around it and gives it life,” he says.

Another oft-repeated theme is the importance of space. Chillida’s life before he was an artist – first as a goalie for San Sebastián’s Real Sociedad football club and later as an architecture student – prepared him well for the sculptures he would later create, encouraging his designer’s eye for form and his goalie’s innate understanding of space. In pieces such as *Lo Profundo es el Aire XVII* (How Deep is Air XVII), the empty space is the focus of the piece, making what’s not there is as important as what is.

This sculpture, a hulking piece of rose-coloured granite, is a simple shape with two smooth tunnels boring through. The work is subtle but powerful as it draws attention to the direction and depth of the

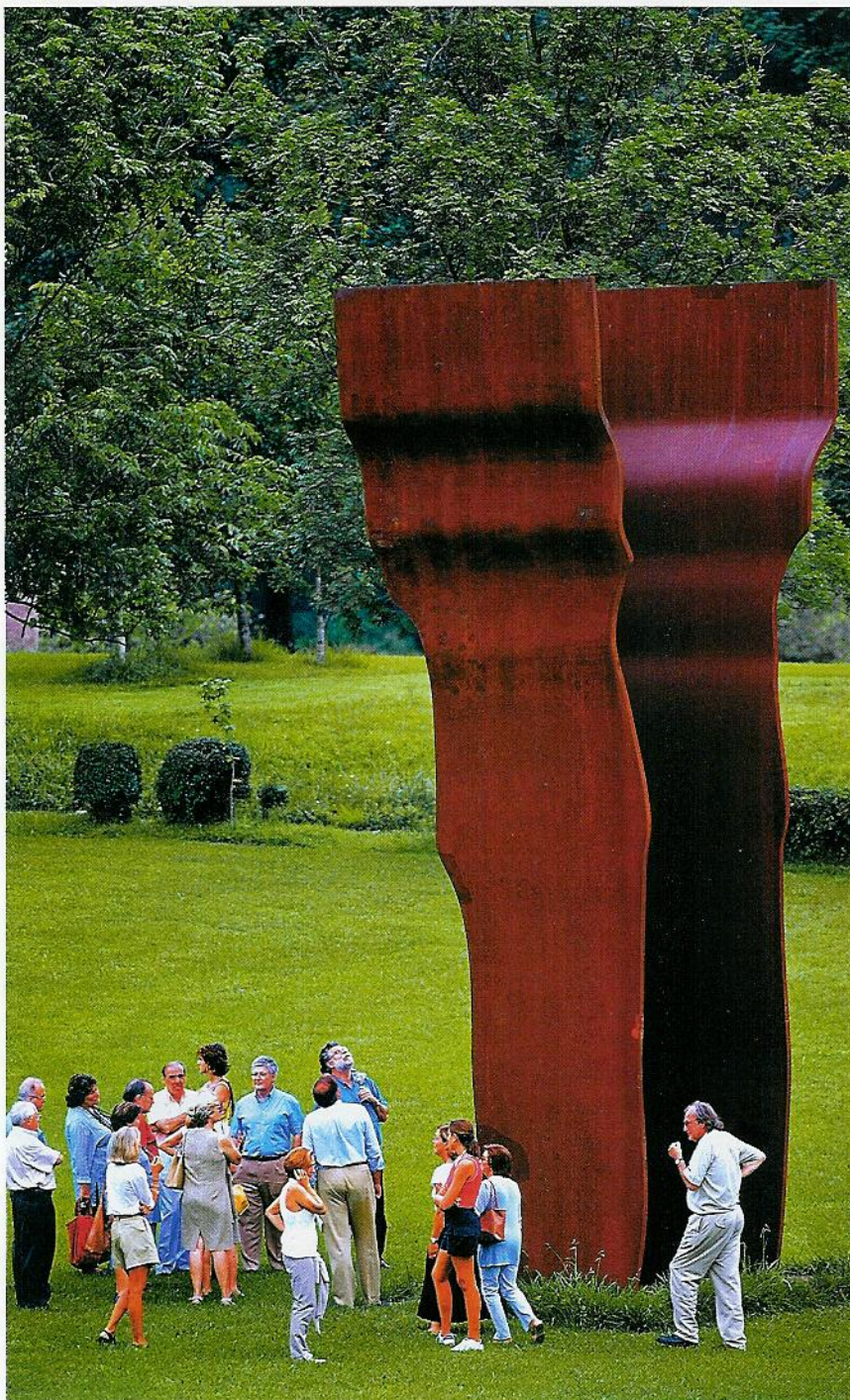




tunnel, giving viewers the sense of being able to move through the piece.

The idea of empty space is central to Chillida's art, demonstrated perfectly in his polemic *Tindaya* project, begun in the mid-1990s but still unfinished nearly four years after his death. The concept is simple: to create a hollow mountain on the island of Fuerteventura, preserving the mountain itself but inserting an empty cube into its interior, making it a ▶

Once Chillida placed his works here, he thought it would be difficult to find anywhere better.



► sculpture of mammoth proportions. The work, Chillida insisted, would be no different than what was already being done by rock quarries, but the effect would be very different: the vast empty space (as tall as a 25-storey building) would act as a “sculpture dedicated to tolerance”.

“As my father said, ‘This will make us realise how small and equal we are,’” his son says.

Environmental groups oppose the project, but supporters say that hollowing out the mountain would help preserve it. Currently, studies are being done to analyse the viability of such a grand undertaking, and Chillida’s family is hopeful his last project will eventually be completed. “I believe the work will eventually be carried out, but when, that depends on other people,” his son says.

The message behind *Tindaya* highlights the artist’s humanistic, non-political beliefs, something particularly significant in the highly-politicised Basque Country. Though his roots ran deep and his work was doubtlessly inspired by the local landscape and heritage, his interests and area of influence were international; his sculptures can be found throughout Europe, the Americas and Asia.

“Here in the Basque Country I feel like I’m where I belong, like a tree adapted to the land, but with branches that reach out to the rest of the world,” Chillida said before his death. “But since this is where I’m from, my work will take on particular tones, a sort of dark light, our light.” ■

VISITING CHILLIDA-LEKU

Address: Bº Jauregui 66, Hernani, San Sebastián, tel: 0034 943 336 006, www.eduardo-chillida.com

Opening hours: 10.30am until 3pm (until 8pm weekdays in July and August). Closed Tuesdays.

Admission: €8 adults, €6 children,

Tours: Audio tour (English available) €3.50, guided tour (English available with advance booking) €5 per person. Guided tours given at 11am, 12.15pm and 1.30pm (weekends only).

Services: Picnic area, vending machines, gift shop

How to get there: From the centre of San Sebastián, take bus G2 from C/ Okendo 10. The bus is run by Autobuses Garayar (tel: 0034 943 556 658) and runs every half-hour.



PICTURES: SUPERSTOCK; FOTOTECA